

**MAKING A CASE FOR UNIVERSAL FIRE SERVICE PROFESSIONAL  
QUALIFICATIONS CERTIFICATION RECIPROCITY**

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

By: David J. Brooks, Director  
Wisconsin Fire Service Training  
Madison, Wisconsin

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## **ABSTRACT**

The importance of fire service professional qualifications certification has increased dramatically in recent years. Being certified is not only a source of pride and sense of accomplishment for the individual, it is fast becoming a prerequisite for hire as a career fire fighter. The problem was that individuals certified by the state of Wisconsin, even though their certification criteria met established national standards, could not receive reciprocal certification from other certification entities. Likewise, individuals certified by other entities would not be granted reciprocal Wisconsin certification in many cases, even though their certification criteria met the same national standards.

The purpose of this research project was to analyze the many equivalency and reciprocity policies of fire service certification entities, and develop recommendations for the establishment of a universal certification reciprocity policy. The project utilized an action research procedure. Research questions to be answered were

1. Which national standards address the qualifications and resulting certifications of fire service personnel?
2. What does the available data say about the certification programs of selected states or other entities?
3. What does the available data say regarding accreditation of fire service certification programs?
4. What are the positions of various certification entities regarding recognition of accreditation agencies?
5. What are the positions of various certification entities regarding reciprocity?

6. What are the obstacles to establishing a uniform national certification reciprocity policy?

The procedures required a review of available literature on the subject and interviews with administrators of selected certification entities regarding their policies, observations, experiences, opinions, beliefs and recommendations relative to the issue. The findings indicated that the certification programs of virtually every entity investigated based their criteria on the recognized national standards; the two well-recognized accreditation agencies have likewise referenced their criteria to the national standards. The findings also indicated that the majority of certification entities favor the establishment of a universal certification reciprocity policy, even while acknowledging that obstacles to such establishment exist.

This report recommended certification entities not currently accredited by either of the two recognized accreditation agencies to become so accredited; this action will help ensure quality is ingrained in their certification programs. This report further recommended that the two recognized accreditation agencies institute unconditional reciprocity among entities they have accredited; this action will add value to accreditation. Lastly, this report recommended resolution of the differences between the two recognized accreditation agencies; this will allow universal fire service professional qualifications certification reciprocity to become reality.

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## INTRODUCTION

Fire service personnel in Wisconsin have for many years had the opportunity to become state certified according to the standards of the National Professional Qualifications System. Such certification is provided by the Fire Education and Training Section of the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS). Many volunteer fire fighters who so became certified discovered that certification facilitated their being hired as paid fire fighters by state fire departments. Paid fire fighters likewise learned that their being state certified permitted smoother lateral transfer to better paying jobs with larger state fire departments. Certification has, thus, provided a large, well-qualified labor pool from which the paid state fire departments can draw when they attempt to fill the approximately 80-90 annual fire fighter position openings. This relatively small number of in-state position openings has caused many certified individuals to seek fire service employment in other states. At the same time, fire fighters certified by other states increasingly seek lateral transfers to paid Wisconsin fire departments.

The problem was that fire service personnel certified by our state could not receive reciprocal certification from other states when they attempted lateral transfer to fire departments in those states. Wisconsin likewise would not, in many cases, issue reciprocity to individuals certified by other states who sought fire service employment in our state. This situation resulted in time-consuming review and evaluation of the job seekers' training records by the certification authorities of both affected states. Because most state training programs are designed to satisfy national standards, these reviews and evaluations usually determined that the training was equivalent to that provided in the

evaluating state. The job seeker(s) were subsequently deemed qualified to challenge the certification examination of the evaluating state; and if successful, become eligible for that certification (pending satisfaction of the usual prerequisite of being a member of a fire department within the state). Unconditional universal reciprocity did not exist.

The purpose of this research project was to analyze the numerous equivalency and reciprocity policies of fire service certification entities and develop recommendations for the establishment of a universal policy regarding certification reciprocity.

An action research procedure was used to address the problem. This researcher reviewed topical literature obtained from the National Emergency Training Center (NETC) Learning Resource Center (LRC). Literature of national certification accreditation agencies and published policies of selected certification bodies were also reviewed. Administrators of selected state certification entities were interviewed regarding their policies, observations, experiences, opinions, beliefs and recommendations relative to the issue.

The following questions were answered using the action research procedure:

1. Which national standards address the qualifications and resulting certifications of fire service personnel?
2. What does the available data say about the certification programs of selected states or other entities?
3. What does the available data say regarding accreditation of fire service certification programs?
4. What are the positions of various certification entities regarding recognition of accreditation agencies?

5. What are the positions of various certification entities regarding reciprocity?
6. What are the obstacles to establishing a uniform national certification reciprocity policy?

## **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

The Wisconsin fire service is comprised of approximately 870 fire departments, with 810 of those organizations consisting entirely of volunteer members. The remaining 60 departments consist of either all career members or a combination of career and paid-on-call members. It is estimated that there are over 25,000 persons engaged in fire fighting throughout the state.

Training and education have been a major part of the activities of Wisconsin fire departments for many years. In the early 1970s, organized state-sponsored fire training programs became available through the Wisconsin Board of Vocational, Technical, and Adult Education (WBVTAE), which in 1994 became the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) Board. The WTCS consists of 16 technical college districts, with a total of 47 campuses statewide.

On May 23, 1979, the WBVTAE was designated by state statute as the delivery system for fire service training; and at the same time became the administrative agency for the new voluntary fire service certification program. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) 1000 Series Standards were adopted as the minimum requirements upon which training programs curricula and certification of knowledge and skills would be based.

Since the training and certification process needed a statewide cadre of instructors who were certified under *NFPA 1041, Standard for Fire Instructor Professional Qualifications*, to teach the new curricula, the first order of business was “grandparenting” prospective fire instructors to Fire Fighter Level III equivalency (Fire Fighter III certification per *NFPA 1001, Standard for Fire Fighter Professional Qualifications* was the prerequisite to entry into fire instructor training at that time). This phase of the process was completed through fire chiefs “signing off” instructor candidates’ proficiency in NFPA 1001 requirements on a form prepared for that purpose. These candidates were then enrolled in statewide train-the-trainers consisting of the 40-hour National Fire Academy (NFA) *Educational Methodology* course. Instructors for the train-the-trainer were highly qualified individuals who had previously been trained at the NFA campus in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

With the instructors trained and certified and a new fire fighter curriculum designed to meet requirements of the NFPA 1001 standard in place, the WBVTAE set about the business of preparing candidates for fire fighter certification. Certification was achieved through documentation by certified instructors of the fire fighter candidates’ proficiency in NFPA 1001 skills requirements on a prepared form, and the candidates’ passing a written examination administered by WBVTAE proctors.

Three levels of fire fighter certification were available at that time, with Fire Fighter Level I being the prerequisite for entry into Fire Fighter Level II training, and Fire Fighter Level II certification being the prerequisite for entry into Fire Fighter Level III training. Fire Fighter Level II certification was also the prerequisite for entry into Fire Apparatus Driver/Operator training, and Fire Fighter III certification was the prerequisite for entry into



Fire Officer training and Fire Instructor training (all prerequisites listed above were in accordance with requirements of the applicable standard at the time).

While numerous individuals became certified during the 1980s, certification did not gain universal popularity until 1991, when state funding became available to provide no-cost training to members of state fire departments. By 1994, over 10,000 individuals had become certified at some category or level. At about this same time, virtually all career fire departments established the prerequisite of Wisconsin Fire Fighter Certification for hire for entry-level positions.

Because career fire department employment was a very desirable occupational field, not only in our state but other states as well, job applicants readily crossed state borders. Since most states were like ours, providing certification and because hiring fire departments required the applicants to have state certification, questions or requests for certification transferability abounded. These questions and requests inevitably led to the applicant having to submit their training records to the certifying entity of the state in which they were seeking fire service employment. Review and evaluation of these numerous records was a lengthy, laborious process for the members of already busy certification organizations. Since the review and evaluation usually led to acceptance of the training anyway, why couldn't reciprocity for the certification simply be provided?

This research project is relevant to the Managing Change Unit (11) of the NFA's *Executive Leadership* course in that it entails application of the Model for Planning Organizational Change to offer solutions to a problem faced by many organizations.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Review of the literature will indicate several areas of relevancy to the problem being analyzed. First, the review will list the national standards which address the qualifications for the most universally popular fire service certifications. Next, it will reveal key points of the certification programs of selected states or entities. Thirdly, it will explore the requirements and goals of the agencies which provide certification program accreditation and the positions of various certification organization officials regarding recognition of them. Lastly, it will provide the views of the administrators of several certification entities regarding certification reciprocity and any perceived obstacles to reciprocity.

### **Relevant National Standards**

*NFPA 1000, Standard for Fire Service Professional Qualifications Accreditation and Certification Systems* (1994 Edition), is the currently recognized national standard dealing with systems which provide certification. It also addresses requirements of the agencies which accredit such systems.

*NFPA 1001, Standard for Fire Fighter Professional Qualifications* (1997 Edition), is the currently recognized national standard pertaining to fire fighter job performance requirements. Chapter 3 of this standard specifies requirements for fire department personnel expected to perform their duties under direct supervision. Chapter 4 lists requirements for those personnel expected to operate under general supervision.

*NFPA 1002, Standard for Fire Apparatus Driver/Operator Professional Qualifications* (1998 Edition), specifies the requirements for fire department personnel whose duties encompass the maintenance and operation of fire department vehicles.

*NFPA 1003, Standard for Airport Fire Fighter Professional Qualifications* (1994 Edition), lists the performance requirements of personnel whose duties include aircraft incident rescue and fire fighting.

*NFPA 1021, Standard for Fire Officer Professional Qualifications* (1997 Edition), addresses the performance requirements of fire department personnel whose duties include directing and supervising activities of subordinate department members.

*NFPA 1031, Standard for Professional Qualifications for Fire Inspector and Plan Examiner* (1998 Edition), identifies requirements for persons responsible for fire safety inspections of buildings.

*NFPA 1041, Standard for Fire Service Instructor Professional Qualifications* (1996 Edition), highlights the requirements of individuals engaged in instruction and training of fire service personnel.

### **Certification Programs of Selected States**

Many states, and other entities empowered to do so, provide fire service certification. In an article about certification at the Mississippi State Fire Academy, Brackin (1995) relates the Academy's establishment in 1979 of certification courses designed to meet or exceed NFPA Professional Qualification Standards. Today, the Academy delivers a six-week minimum standard course and additionally provides certification courses for Fire Apparatus Driver/Operator, Fire Officer, Fire Investigator, Fire Service Instructor and Safety officer.

The state of Texas, after many years of setting certification standards for paid fire fighters only, in 1991 created the Texas Commission on Fire Protection to set standards

for all fire fighters. Hughes (1995) outlined certifications provided at four levels each for Fire Fighter, Fire Inspector, Fire Instructor, Fire and Arson Investigator, Aircraft Rescue Fire Fighter and Marine Fire Fighter within the state. He further related the state's efforts to gain accreditation for the provided certifications.

Hall (1995) described the efforts of the United States Department of Defense (DOD) toward the development of a fire service certification program for all branches of the DOD. In early 1993, the DOD program provided certification for Fire Fighter I and II, Driver/Operator, Airport Fire Fighter, Fire Officer I and II, Fire Service Instructor I, and Fire Inspector I and II levels. Accreditation from a national accreditation entity was achieved for all levels later that year. Additional certifications since added, according to him, include Fire Instructor II and III, Hazardous Materials Awareness, Hazardous Materials Operations, Hazardous Materials Technician, and Hazardous Materials Incident Commander.

Frost (1995) related the achievements of the South Carolina Fire Academy with regard to accreditation of its certifications in five occupational areas: Fire Fighter I, Fire Fighter II, Pump Operator/Driver, Instructor I and Fire Officer I. He further went on to describe the Academy's 208-acre \$19,000,000 facility where the certification courses are taught.

## **Certification Accreditation Agencies**

Two major fire service certification accreditation agencies currently exist. They are the National Board on Fire Service Professional Qualifications (NBFSPQ) and the International Fire Service Accreditation Congress (IFSAC).

The NBFSPQ was founded October 25, 1972. Later that same year, NBFSPQ requested that NFPA establish four technical committees to develop minimum standards for Fire Fighter, Fire Instructor, Fire Officer, and Fire Investigator (Estepp, 1994). Prior to that date, national standards for fire service professional qualifications did not exist. With establishment of national standards, certification of fire service personnel became a reality. The NBFSPQ further provided accreditation of established certification levels.

Today, NBFSPQ offers accredited certifications for Fire Fighter, Apparatus Operator, Airport Fire Fighter, Fire Inspector, Fire Officer, Public Fire and Life Safety Educator, Fire Investigator, Hazardous Materials, and Fire Instructor. The mission statement of NBFSPQ is as follows:

The purpose of the National Board on Fire Service Professional Qualifications is to establish an internationally recognized means of acknowledging professional achievement in the fire services and related fields. The certification of uniform members of public fire departments, both career and volunteer, is its primary goal - although other persons and organizations with fire protection interests may also be considered for participation. The accreditation process encourages reciprocity among certifying agencies for accredited members of the National Board on Fire Service Professional Qualifications Systems. (NBFSPQ, 1993, p.2)

The NBFSPQ (1992) lists 12 criteria certifying entities must satisfy before being considered for accreditation. (Although somewhat lengthy, this author believes it is important the list be included in this literature review):

- Uniform testing and grading procedures conducted not less than annually at locations, times, and a cost appropriate to meet the needs of the certifying entity (making accreditation application).
- Testing procedures which uniformly and consistently measure the performance of candidates for certification only in relation to those skills, abilities, and knowledges consistent with the requirements of the applicable standard.
- Certification procedures which are not discriminatory and in accord with the equal employment opportunity act, 1972.
- Procedures which ensure that the applying entity is responsive to the views and opinions of groups affected by their certification program.
- The certification process is available equally to all persons served by the entity applying for accreditation and that adequate prior notice of all examinations and tests are provided to all interested parties.
- Procedures that ensure complete impartiality, confidentiality, and are safeguarded against any misuse or abuse.
- Facilities and equipment that are adequate for the full testing of the performance objectives required.
- Procedures that ensure adequate supervision to maintain a safe environment during certification testing.

- Appropriately qualified examiners and test evaluators who have not been directly involved in the training of the candidate.
- Procedures that ensure that NFPA fire service professional qualifications standards or other standards approved by the NBFSPQ are the basis upon which certification testing is conducted.
- Accredited entities shall maintain lists of the results of testing for all certification candidates under their auspices.
- Accredited entities shall, when requested by the NBFSPQ, provide representatives samples of materials, instruction, and test procedures.

The IFSAC was established in 1992 as a peer-driven fire service certification accreditation alternative to NBFSPQ (Landolfi, 1997). It now additionally accredits higher education institution fire-related degree programs. The IFSAC is composed of a Council of Governors and two Assemblies, each with its own Board of Governors, one for the accreditation of fire service certification, the other for degree program accreditation. This review will only deal with the activities of the IFSAC Certificate Assembly, the activities of the Degree Assembly not being within the scope of this research project.

The mission statement of IFSAC is

To increase the level of professionalism of the fire service through the accreditation of those entities who work with Assemblies within the Congress, for the accreditation of fire service training and/or education, by increasing the coordination of efforts between the Assemblies of the Congress, and serve as a mechanism of arbitration on issues of debate between the Assemblies. (IFSAC, 1998, p.2)

The IFSAC (1998) lists 17 criteria certifying entities must satisfy before being considered for accreditation. (This author believes that the list, although extensive, must be included in this literature review, so the reader can readily make comparison to the previously listed NBFSPQ criteria):

- All testing and certifying services shall be made available to all of its constituents without regard to race, sex or ethnic origin.
- All testing and certifying services shall be made available to all fire service personnel; a policy relating to release of test scores shall be in place.
- A system that allows access to testing for all eligible parties on a regular basis shall be in place. The system shall include a methodology for scheduling and administering testing to the preponderance of the constituency.
- An accredited entity may delegate its certifying authority only after informing the Certificate Assembly Administration and only under circumstances (listed in the performance criteria section of the IFSAC Handbook).
- Examinations for any level for which certification is offered shall be provided. Such examinations shall be subject to the following conditions:
  - Manipulative skills of practical testing;
  - Knowledge objectives shall be examined through objectively graded examination;
  - Knowledge examinations shall be graded with predetermined grade level denoting the pass level; and
  - Practical examinations shall be graded on a pass/fail basis.



- Establishment and publishing of the prerequisites required to take examinations at the various certification levels.
- Accredited entities shall have written procedures that govern their testing processes in relation to the following
  - Proctors shall not be the same person(s) who instructs a given prerequisite course of instruction, unless all of the following conditions are met:
    - The accredited entity has approved the examination process in advance;
    - An audit procedure is in place to ensure testing session credibility; and
    - Proctors shall have signed an agreement acknowledging their intentions to comply with the testing procedures of the accredited entity or shall have been certified by the accrediting entity as proctor(s).
  - The accredited entity shall dismiss from the testing process any proctor who fails to abide by the entity's testing procedures.
- Accredited entities shall provide the date, time and location of any testing process upon receipt of a request for such information from the Certificate Assembly Administrative Office.
- Accredited entities shall permit a representative designated by the Certificate Assembly Board of Governors to observe any testing process upon receiving notice of intent to observe the test at least 48 hours prior to the test.
- Accredited entities shall collect and maintain for an appropriate amount of time the following data:
  - Names of candidates tested;
  - Social security number or equivalent;

- Certification level records; and
  - IFSAC seal number.
- Tests for all levels shall be made available to representatives designated by the Certificate Assembly Board of Governors.
- A test item bank or other recognized means of evaluation for all accredited levels of certification testing shall be maintained.
- Accredited entities shall have written procedures for the following:
  - Referencing all test items to the criteria used by the entity; and
  - Analyzing items for validity and reliability.
- A written appeal procedure shall be in place to allow participants to appeal certification decisions.
- A written policy which addresses the impact of accreditation shall be in place. The policy shall affirm that accreditation shall not affect the current certification status of any individual.
- A written policy that specifies how persons previously certified or holding a position will be allowed to participate in the certification system. The policy shall address this matter in one of the following ways:
  - Personnel shall be granted an equivalent certification upon request; or
  - Personnel shall be examined to determine if they meet the certification requirements.
- An accredited entity shall agree to examine the certification credentials of individuals certified by other accredited entities to determine which level of certification, if any, is applicable.

### **Recognition of Accreditation Agencies**

While compiling information for an NFA Executive Fire Officer Program research project, Landolfi (1997) circulated a survey instrument to the training and certification directors of the 50 states. Several survey questions addressed the respondents' recognition of, or familiarity with, the two major accreditation agencies. With a 62 percent return rate (31 instruments), 84 percent of those responding indicated they had some form of certification program in place. Twenty-three percent indicated that they share reciprocity agreements with other entities. All 31 respondents indicated that they were familiar with IFSAC or NBFSPQ, and 65 percent of them indicated that they accept IFSAC (68 percent NBFSPQ), at least for recognition of training received by fire personnel.

In an article on challenges of fire education and training accreditation, Fenner (1997) listed 44 members of the IFSAC Certificate Assembly from the United States alone and an additional 13 members from other countries of the world.

According to NBFSPQ's operational procedures (NBFSPQ, 1993), over 25,000 nationally accredited certifications have been earned since that organization's inception. It is, thus, apparent that both IFSAC and NBFSPQ are well-recognized throughout the fire service community.

### **Views Regarding Certification Reciprocity or Perceived Obstacles to Reciprocity**

Landolfi (1997) learned that 84 percent of the state training and certification directors who responded to his survey indicated their entity had some form of certification system in place. While only 23 percent indicated that they shared reciprocity with other entities, a whopping 81 percent reported their belief that a system of national certification reciprocity would be beneficial to the fire service.

In a survey of IFSAC entities (Utah Fire and Rescue Academy [UFRA], 1996) 41 respondents (100 percent of the target group) provided some interesting views regarding certification reciprocity. Twenty-eight respondents (68 percent) indicated that they accepted certificates with IFSAC seals from other entities, while only 13 (32 percent) responded in the negative. Of the latter group, 11 listed additional requirements that must be satisfied before reciprocity could be provided. Examples of these additional requirements included residency in the entity's state, membership on a fire department within the entity's state, medical and physical fitness testing by the entity, and mandatory challenge of the entity's certification examination(s).

All respondents provided additional comments regarding the issue of reciprocation, with a large number supportive of the concept. The most positive of these stated, "we consider one of the prime advantages of the IFSAC accreditation model the fact that any certification from another agency bearing this seal indicates the holder has clearly demonstrated their competence to this standard or level" (UFRA, 1996, p.2).

With regard to perceived obstacles to reciprocity, Landolfi (1997) discovered that 59 percent of the respondents to his survey instrument indicated there was some type of obstacle that needed to be overcome in order to achieve national reciprocity. The three most prevalent examples noted were traditional thinking, resistance to change, and "turf phobias" (Landolfi, 1997, p.14).

## **PROCEDURES**

The research procedures used in this report included a literature review and interviews with administrators of the fire service certification entities of selected states of the union. The literature reviewed consisted of books, magazine articles and applied research projects found at the NETC LRC as well as literature on file at the WTCS state office.

Interviews were initially conducted with the administrators of the fire service certification entities of the states contiguous with Wisconsin; the list was eventually expanded to include the remaining member-states of Training Resources and Data Exchange (TRADE) Region V, Indiana and Ohio. All interviews were limited to one hour in length; all were conducted by telephone. A listing of prepared questions designed to elicit pertinent information concerning the target groups' policies and opinions relative to certification, recognition of other entities' certifications, and certification accreditation was asked of each person (Appendix).

### **Assumptions and Project Limitations**

It was assumed that all information collected for this report, whether it was from the literature reviewed or interviews, was correct in nature as to content and the way it was presented to this author.

Queries of the NETC LRC database using the words “reciprocity” and “accreditation” were only partially successful in locating information concerning the project objectives. A subsequent query utilizing the term “certification” yielded considerably more reference material. Much of the literature accessed at the WTCS state office could only be found at such a facility; succeeding researchers should contact like agencies for similar information during the research process.

In order to complete the project in a timely manner, a relatively small target group was interviewed. While this group was chosen primarily based on its vast experience and expertise, its familiarity to the author was also a factor. The relatively small sampling of the national fraternity the group represented could be viewed as a project limitation.

## **RESULTS**

### **Research Question #1**

**Which national standards address the qualifications and resulting certifications of fire service personnel?**

There are numerous national standards that have great influence over the training programs and subsequent certifications of members of the national fire service. They include the following:

1. *NFPA 1001, Standard for Fire Fighter Professional Qualifications* (1997 Edition).

This standard identifies the job performance requirements of structural fire fighters. It specifically identifies the minimum requirements for fire fighter candidates and also the two levels of performance thereafter. This standard directly influences fire fighter level certification criteria.

2. *NFPA 1002, Standard for Fire Apparatus Driver/Operator Professional Qualifications* (1998 Edition).

This standard identifies the job performance requirements for driver/operators of fire department apparatus. It directly influences the criteria for certification of driver/operators.

3. *NFPA 1003, Standard for Airport Fire Fighter Professional Qualifications* (1994 Edition).

This standard identifies the job performance requirements for fire fighters with aircraft rescue and fire fighting (ARFF) responsibilities. It directly influences the certification of airport fire fighters.

4. *NFPA 1021, Standard for Fire Officer Professional Qualifications* (1997 Edition).

This standard identifies the job performance requirements of fire department supervisory personnel. It directly influences the certification criteria for fire department officers.

5. *NFPA 1031, Standard for Professional Qualifications for Fire Inspector and Plan Examiner* (1998 Edition).

This standard identifies the job performance requirements for fire inspectors. It directly influences their certification criteria.

6. *NFPA 1041, Standard for Fire Service Instructor Professional Qualifications* (1996 Edition).

This standard identifies the job performance requirements for three levels of fire service instructor. It directly influences their certification criteria.

Nearly all state or other certification entities, particularly those mentioned in the literature review, indicated that NFPA standards were utilized as the basis for their certification criteria. All members of the interview target group indicated that the relevant NFPA standards formed the basis for their entities' certifications.

## **Research Question #2**

### **What does the available data say about the certification programs of selected states or other entities?**

Virtually every state or other certification entity cited in the literature review bases their certification requirements on the NFPA standards; some have additional requirements which exceed the applicable standard. The only exception known to this author is the state of Florida, which for minimum fire fighter standards, requires applicants to submit proof of completion of a training program of at least 360 hours in specified topics (UFRA, 1996). Landolfi (1997) wrote that Florida's statutes, which take precedence over voluntary standards, drive the state's hours-based certification program(s).



Interviews with the administrators of the other fire service certification entities in TRADE Region V (plus the administrator for the state of Iowa) revealed that although mandatory training program hours vary, all have the same requirements as specified in NFPA standards. In fact, the fire fighter training programs of the states of Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin are all based on the International Fire Service Training Association (IFSTA) *Essentials of Fire Fighting* 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> Edition curriculum. Training programs for other certification categories vary from entity to entity; however, they all are designed to meet the applicable NFPA standard (for eventual certification). Many of these training programs are shared among the TRADE V region members; most are further disseminated to the other TRADE regions, during the biennial National TRADE Seminar at the National Fire Academy.

### **Research Question #3**

#### **What does the available data say regarding accreditation of fire certification programs?**

The two major fire service certification accreditation agencies, NBFSPQ and IFSAC, both have well-written mission statements that espouse the recognition and increase of professionalism through the accreditation of fire service certification entities. They share ten criteria; and entities that wish to be accredited by them must satisfy the following (NBFSPQ, 1992; IFSAC, 1998):

- Establishment of non-discriminatory certification procedures.
- Uniform testing procedures in place.
- Providing a certification process that is equally available to all constituents.
- Adequate maintenance of testing and certification records.

- Testing criteria based on national standards or standards approved by the accreditation agency.
- Providing to the accreditation agency samples of test procedures, materials and instructions.
- Establishment of testing procedures which consistently measure candidate performance.
- Establishment of testing procedures which ensure complete impartiality and confidentiality.
- Providing qualified examiners who were not involved in training certification candidates.
- At a minimum, entities shall agree to examine the certification records of individuals certified by other accredited entities; at best, they should consider full reciprocity of same.

The NBFSPQ (1992) has the additional criteria of provision of adequate testing facilities and equipment, adequate supervision of testing for safety reasons and requiring the certification entity to allow the input of constituents into the certification process.

The IFSAC (1998) has the additional requirements of entities' publishing prerequisites to exams, establishing large banks of written test questions, establishing a written appeal process, establishing a written test score release policy, establishing a written policy addressing how accreditation will impact existing certification issued by the entity, and establishing a written policy on how previously certified persons can participate in the new, accredited certification process. The IFSAC further directs how entities must evaluate knowledge and skills and also allows provision for entities to delegate their certifying authority to subordinate entities. It can reasonably be stated that meeting the

criteria of either accreditation agency will make any certifying entity's certificates more credible, thus, more likely to be accepted for reciprocity by other entities.

If all certification entities in the nation were to become accredited by at least one of the accreditation agencies, the groundwork for universal fire service professional qualifications certification reciprocity will have been laid.

#### **Research Question #4**

#### **What are the positions of various certification entities regarding recognition of accreditation agencies?**

The literature review revealed that NBFSPQ and IFSAC were well-recognized nationally, at least by the administrators of state training and certifying bodies. This situation was likewise the case among the members of the target group interviewed by this author. All six individuals indicated they were very familiar with both accrediting bodies. Four of them represent entities currently accredited by IFSAC for at least one category of certification: the states of Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, and Minnesota.

The Director of the Michigan Fire Fighters Training Council and head of the state certification program, indicated that his entity was, like Wisconsin, currently seeking accreditation from IFSAC (G. Kirt, 9/6/98 telephone interview).

The Executive Officer of Iowa State University's Fire Service Institute and head of the states' certification program, informed this author that his entity had been one of the first in the nation accredited by NBFSPQ (R. Arwood, 9/11/98 telephone interview).

## **Research Question #5**

### **What are the positions of various certification entities regarding reciprocity?**

The literature review revealed that not only do a significant number of states or other entities provide fire service certification for their constituents, many who are accredited by one or both of the two accreditation agencies accept the certifications of other entities accredited by the same agency. The review also indicated that a significant number of entities support at least the concept of national reciprocity.

All members of the telephone interview target group indicated that their entities recognized IFSAC accredited certifications in some manner. Michigan (G. Kirt, 8/6/98 telephone interview), Ohio and Illinois (G. Drew and G. Mason, 8/21/98 telephone interviews) recognize the certificates for training only. All three states require IFSAC certificate holders to challenge their state certification exam(s). Minnesota, Iowa (J. Heim and R. Arwood, 8/11/98 telephone interviews), and Indiana (I. Nevil, 8/21/98 telephone interview) all recognize the certificates for reciprocity purposes. All three require submission of a copy of the IFSAC certificate for review; Iowa further contacts IFSAC to verify that the certification is legitimate.

Three members of the target group indicated that their entity recognized NBFSPQ certification for training only: Michigan (G. Kirt, 8/6/98 telephone interview), Ohio and Indiana (G. Drew and I. Nevil, 8/21/98 telephone interviews); Minnesota and Iowa recognize them for reciprocity (J. Heim and R. Arwood, 8/11/98 telephone interviews). Iowa additionally contacts NBFSPQ to verify legitimacy of the submitted certification.

While several members of the target group indicated they recognized another entity's non-accredited certifications for training purposes, none recognized them for reciprocity.

All members of the target group indicated that reciprocity among the states contiguous with theirs would be beneficial in some way. Interviewees stated that fire fighters residing near state lines frequently belong to fire departments in two states. They also stated that many fire departments have mutual aid agreements with adjacent fire departments in neighboring states. Michigan (G. Kirt, 8/6/98 telephone interview); Minnesota (J. Heim, 8/11/98 telephone interview); and Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio (G. Mason, I. Nevil and G. Drew, 8/21/98 telephone interviews) all indicated that reciprocity, with its accompanying standardization of training would be the major benefit in both instances. Other benefits noted include ability of certified individuals to laterally transfer to fire departments in neighboring states (J. Heim, 8/11/98 telephone interview), (G. Kirt, 8/6/98 telephone interview), and (G. Drew, 8/21/98 telephone interview), and less duplication of training leading to cost savings (G. Drew, 8/21/98 telephone interview). Additionally, R. Arwood (8/11/98 telephone interview) shared his belief that reciprocity, especially among accredited entities, is something that should be an ingrained part of the accreditation process.

All members of the target group indicated that certification reciprocity among all states of the union would be beneficial for many of the same reasons previously stated. G. Drew and I. Nevil (8/21/98 telephone interviews) both indicated their doubts that reciprocity on such a scale would become a reality anytime soon.

When the target group was queried regarding their views relative to IFSAC accredited entities providing reciprocity for NBFSPQ certificates and vice-versa, responses were as follows: J. Heim (8/11/98 telephone interview), “yes, the same standards are met, the same quality should be there;” R. Arwood (8/11/98 telephone interview), “yes, philosophically, if there are two or more certification accreditation agencies that say they meet national standards - they should be the same;” G. Kirt (8/6/98 telephone interview), “yes, in an ideal world;” I. Nevil (8/21/98 telephone interview), “I believe an agreement may already have been made;” G. Drew (8/21/98 telephone interview), “I believe this to be an issue for those two agencies to address.” G. Mason (8/21/98 telephone interview) stated her belief that IFSAC accredited entities should not provide reciprocity for NBFSPQ certificates.

### **Research Question #6**

#### **What are the obstacles to establishing a uniform national certification reciprocity policy?**

Landolfi (1997) reported that the majority of the respondents to his survey indicated their belief that there were obstacles to be overcome if uniform national certification reciprocity was to become reality. All members of the telephone interview target group stated their collective belief that obstacles to such reciprocity needed to be overcome, as well. G. Mason and I. Nevil (8/21/98 telephone interviews), and J. Heim and R. Arwood (8/11/98 telephone interviews) all agreed that “turf phobias” (Landolfi, 1997, p.14) were a major impediment to uniform national certification reciprocity. Other obstacles cited by the target group are as follows: lack of ready access to professionally developed curriculums, lack of trust among the various entities, and the possibility that accreditation agency fees

might be a monetary concern (G. Kirt, 8/6/98 telephone interview). Additional obstacles cited included some states not having the resources to sufficiently expand their present scope of training, and “dinosaurs” (G. Mason, 8/21/98 telephone interview); lack of consistency of training, laws and rules of some states concerning mandatory vs. non-mandatory training and certification (G. Drew, 8/21/98 telephone interview). Some final roadblocks noted was the ability of entities to collect fees for certification; not being able to verify the certificate presented (R. Arwood, 8/11/98 telephone interview); and “politics” (I. Nevil, 8/21/98 telephone interview).

## **DISCUSSION**

The decision to research the feasibility of development of a universal fire service professional qualifications certification reciprocity policy was made in an attempt to solve a problem being experienced by all certification entities and affecting numerous fire personnel nationwide. If certification is to achieve its stated purpose, namely to acknowledge and increase professionalism in the fire service field, such recognition should not cease at certification entity borders; this is especially true if the same national standards are being used for certification criteria by the entities.

As this author applied the four-step model for planning organizational change (unit #11 [Managing Change] of the NFA Executive Leadership Course) to the problem, it became evident that a valid case for universal certification reciprocity could indeed be made. It further became clear that the only logical avenue to arriving at the establishment of such a policy was through the two recognized accreditation agencies. Both agencies base their accreditation on the ability of an entity to certify to recognized national standards, and they

also share ten common accreditation criteria. The NBFSPQ additionally has three criteria specific to its accreditation process, while IFSAC lists an additional six criteria germane to its process.

Reciprocity among all entities accredited by NBFSPQ would be a relatively simple procedure; the agency actively encourages reciprocity among the entities it accredits. Reciprocity among IFSAC accredited entities, however, is not as enthusiastically espoused; the agency merely requires them to agree to examine the certification credentials of individuals certified by other accredited entities to determine which level of certification, if any, is applicable.

This author can readily attest to the rigorous accreditation process of IFSAC; WTCS Fire Education and Training underwent, in 1996, an IFSAC Site Team visit to evaluate possible Fire Fighter I certification accreditation. In spite of the fact that the process had been viewed in-house as adequate prior to the visit, the IFSAC team pinpointed numerous deficiencies to be rectified before accreditation could be granted. After spending a considerable portion of the intervening two years addressing the noted shortcomings, our organization is convinced of the universal validity of certificates bearing IFSAC seals. Likewise, WTCS Fire Education and Training recognizes the considerable effort an entity expends to gain NBFSPQ accreditation. As such, WTCS Fire Education and Training has adopted a policy of unconditional reciprocity for valid IFSAC and NBFSPQ certifications of the same category and level (as provided by WTCS Fire Education and Training).

During the research process, it was learned that the majority of states and other certification entities support at least the concept of a system of national certification



reciprocity. As previously stated, the best way to arrive at such a system is through the two recognized accreditation agencies. Each must make a concerted effort to achieve unconditional reciprocity among the entities it accredits; IFSAC must first address the concept internally, then include supporting language in its mission statement or listed criteria. Both must then strive to resolve their differences so as to make reciprocity between them and their accredited entities a reality. Since the missions of NBFSPQ and IFSAC are the same, resolution of their differences mainly centers around mutual adoption of identical accreditation criteria.

It is the opinion of this author that the obstacles to establishing a uniform national certification reciprocity policy identified during this research project can be overcome. The eventual winners will be the fire service personnel whose dedication and efforts made their original certification a reality; the personnel responsible for quality control in each of the certification entities; and finally, the very institution of certification itself. Certification that is “good anywhere” is no longer a desirable concept, it is a practice whose time has come.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This research project recommends the following actions be taken in numerical order:

1. All certification entities not currently accredited by either of the two recognized accreditation agencies, NBFSPQ and IFSAC make application to one (or both) to be so accredited, at least for fire fighter level certifications; they should see the process through to fruition. Satisfaction of accreditation criteria forces certification entities to maintain the utmost program quality.

2. Unconditional reciprocity among the entities accredited by either NBFSPQ or IFSAC be instituted. Becoming accredited is an expensive undertaking. If certifications are not reciprocal among entities accredited by the same agency, why expend the dollars and effort for accreditation? It would be far cheaper to just certify residents of the entity, and leave them "on their own" when they attempt lateral transfer across entity borders. Unconditional reciprocity among entities accredited by a given agency, on the other hand, will add validity and value to certifications held; it will also set the stage for action #3.
3. The differences between NBFSPQ and IFSAC must be resolved. It is the sincere hope of this researcher that the upcoming joint NBFSPQ-IFSAC conference December 4 and 5, 1998, in Singer Island, Florida, will be the beginning of such a resolution process. Only when these agencies are in complete agreement will universal fire service professional qualifications certification reciprocity become reality.

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Appendix  
Survey Questions

*Executive Leadership*

## EFOP Research Project Telephone Survey Questions

1. Does your state currently recognize IFSAC-accredited fire training certificates? If yes, how?
2. Does your state currently recognize NBFSPQ-accredited fire training certificates? If yes, how?
3. Does your state recognize other states' non-accredited fire training certificates? If yes, how?
4. If yes to question 3, which states do you recognize?
5. Do you feel reciprocity for certifications among the states contiguous with your own would be beneficial? If yes, how?
6. Do you feel reciprocity for certifications among all states would be beneficial? If yes, how?
7. What do you believe are obstacles to certification reciprocity?
8. Should entities accredited by IFSAC provide reciprocity for NBFSPQS certificates and vice-versa?